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ABSTRACT

Although efforts to support family-school partnerships are a prominent part of strategies for improving education for at-risk students, in communities with wide home/school cultural differences, such "partnerships" often operate on a superficial level involving one-way compliance to school norms. This study examined home-school partnerships in a New York City school, focusing on two families whose children attended the same fifth grade classroom in 1996-97. Members of the Ruiz Vega family and the Arjay family were interviewed and visited at home several times. Clarissa Ruiz had severe reading problems that were overlooked at school because she did not call attention to herself. The study maintains that her parents were not the aggressive advocates that school personnel believed necessary because of their own poor school experiences, lack of skills, and the intimidation of parents inherent in school practices. Luther Arjay had considerable difficulty in completing homework. His mother and school personnel identified the reason for the difficulty and implemented a solution. Mrs. Arjay had a great deal of support from a parent-teacher program sponsored by Lehman College in Luther's fifth grade and was determined to enroll him in the best middle school she could find. The study concluded that the attitudinal changes required to foster the mutual respect necessary to form effective partnerships must be deep and widespread, and must involve transforming the whole school culture. At this school, other reform efforts openly contradicted the effort to foster school-family partnerships. Thus, some families found the door to partnership open, and others found it closed. (Contains 26 references.) (KB)

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Open Doors, Closed Doors:

Home-School Partnerships in a Large Bronx Elementary School

By David Bensman

It is commonly held that family/school partnerships support children's progress (Comer, 1993, Epstein, 1995, Swap, 1993). Efforts to support school partnerships are prominent in local, state, and federal strategies for improving educational opportunities for those held to be "at-risk" (OERI, 1997). But in communities where the cultural differences between home and school are wide, partnership is a more complex phenomenon than is usually realized (Fordham, 1996; Lareau, 1989, Martin, 1992; 1989, Sinclair, 1994; Suina, 1991; Valdes, 1996). The vague term "partnership" frequently masks complicated power dynamics. Often, schools design partnerships to help teachers advance school agendas, but neglect to bring student and family values into the learning community (Weber, 1997). These "partnerships" often operate on a superficial level that involves one-way compliance to school norms. When school efforts fail to enlist families and students in their institutional enterprise, school personnel often blame students, their families, and communities.

In order to investigate the complexity of home-school partnerships in an educational setting where the culture of the school is very different from that of the cultures of the families constituting the surrounding communities, I selected CES 818 in the Morrisania section of the southwest Bronx. The school is located within District 9, in the poorest congressional district in the United States. Its student body includes 1600 students in two sites, the main building on the south side of the street and the lower school annex on the north side. More than 60% of the students are Hispanic and 30% African American. Sixteen percent of third graders are reading at

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or above level.

Under the leadership of its principal, the school has engaged in a variety of reform efforts. For example, in an effort to make the school more manageable and to foster a sense of community, he has divided the school into four mini-schools, each with its own director, an Assistant Principal. The school's reading program brings students at the same reading level together outside their home classroom to work on skill development in a focused, sequential manner. Outside corporate funding supports arts programs, computers, athletics. Federal dropout prevention grants pay for in-house counseling. There is also a parent education and participation program, which offers courses in English as a second language, GED courses, and parenting programs, and which recruits parents involved in these courses to participate in fund-raising, school trips, and educational planning.

Parent Participation in a Fifth Grade Classroom

In order to determine how the school's efforts to promote family-school partnerships impacted on children's learning, I will focus on the story of two families whose children attended Mrs. Lynns's fifth grade classroom, where I spent most of the 1996-97 school year.

Mrs. Lynns, a tall, slim, meticulously dressed African American woman, with a Masters degree in Counseling Psychology and 10 years experience teaching at CES 818, was usually the center of attention in her classroom of 31 students. Mrs. Lynns was widely respected by her colleagues at CES 818 for her ability to keep control without shouting and harsh disciplinary measures. Her technique was consistent enforcement of "rules and regulations." Children who

talked to each other, forgot homework, or left their seats without raising their hands to obtain permission received black marks and lost privileges. Mrs. Lynns' admonitions, instructions, and sentences were delivered in a stern near-whisper. In her graduate psychology classes, Mrs. Lynns had learned that forcing students to strain to hear gave her power, she used that power to create an orderly learning environment, where children could be shown the right way to divide and multiply, organize paragraphs, and find the main ideas in writing samples.

Mrs. Lynns' classroom contrasted impressively with neighboring classrooms, from which the sounds of running feet and raised voices could often be heard. Indeed, children who disrupted other classrooms were often sent to Mrs. Lynns' room to calm down and experience order, even if they were supposed to learning different curriculum units and skills.

Parents were not often seen in Mrs. Lynns' classroom. Jose's grandmother came in twice to serve Spanish lunches, once on Jose's birthday, and once as graduation neared. Several parents came in to respond to notes sent home notifying them that their children were not doing homework or misbehaving. A few more parents came in to bring their own complaints with their children's behavior or lack of academic progress. Twice a year family conferences brought in about half the parents for fifteen-minute meetings, in which Mrs. Lynns explained to parents why their children received the grades they did. Children doing well were praised; parents of children experiencing difficulty were urged to monitor their children's homework. "Leave the teaching to me, I'm the one trained and paid to do it," was Mrs. Lynns' message.

Closed Doors: The Story of the Ruiz Vega Family

In order to learn about the relationships between families and parents, our OERI- funded

study budgeted $3000 for each of the four researchers to pay cooperating families. I decided to ask Clarissa Ruiz' family to participate, offering them $1000 to let me visit their home several times and interview family members.

My first home visit was in January. Clarissa walked home from school with me, down the hill on an exposed concrete staircase, and two blocks over to the public housing project where her family lives. On the way, she tells me that she lives there with her father and mother, two sisters and a brother. Her mother and father have always been together, she tells me proudly, and will always stay together. It's the first time I've heard that Clarissa's father lives with the family -- and Clarissa cautions me not to tell anyone.

After I meet Clarissa's mother and siblings, I try to put everyone at ease by asking Clarissa if she'd like me to help her with her homework, and her eyes light up. She opens up her math book, and we sit down at the dining room table to start doing arithmetic. I ask Clarissa to read me the first problem, and that's where troubles begin. When Clarissa comes to the word "presents," she can't read the word. I suggest we get the dictionary to look up how to pronounce it. Clarissa goes to the bedroom she shares with her sister and brings back the dictionary I bought her the month before. She looks up "present," we check the pronunciation guide at the bottom of the page, and she determines that the word is "presents." But a few words into the problem, there is the word "data" and Clarissa doesn't know how to read that word, either. And the word "spend" is central to the problem Clarissa is supposed to be doing. Since Clarissa doesn't read the word "spend," she can't understand the problem, much less read the graph and find the answer. She knows how to do the mechanics of subtraction, but how does anyone expect Clarissa to learn math when she can't read the homework problems?

When I went home with Clarissa the first time in early January, and realized that her reading problems were not being fully addressed by the school, I asked teachers and administrators why they thought this had happened. Their answer was that Clarissa was a child who did not call attention to herself, who got along with others, who tried to conceal the problems she was having. Such children can be overlooked, I was repeatedly told, because CES 818 has so many other children with pressing problems, children who are fighting, disrupting classes, or failing to learn English.

School personnel told me that hard-to-see children like Clarissa needed to have parents aggressively advocating for them. When the students failed to progress, their parents needed to ask teachers what was wrong, how the family could help. If they got no satisfaction, they need to bring the issue to the Vice-Principal's and the Principal's attention.

School personnel did not simply try to pass the burden of responsibility on the parents. The school spent some of its scarce resources on parent education programs that tried to help mothers and fathers understand what their children were bring taught, how they could work with their children at home, where they could go for help. Jessic Martinez, the school's parent coordinator, aggressively recruited parents, she supported and nourished the parents' association, and she reached out to individual children and parents. Furthermore, as I will describe shortly, the school provided professional development programs for teachers, some of which explicitly addressed how teachers could work with parents effectively.

Though CES 818 went well beyond business-as-usual in providing opportunities for parents and school personnel to learn to work together to support student learning, Clarissa's reading problems were not addressed aggressively until I intervened, and even after I began

alerting school personnel to the critical nature of her problems, it took an additional five months before Clarissa was properly evaluated and certified as being eligible for additional resources. School personnel told me that Clarissa's experience distressed them, but they believed that similar things would happen again to children whose parents were not aggressive advocates for their children.

Drawing on what I came to know about Clarissa's parents from my federally-supported home visits, I've come to understand why Clarissa's parents are not the "aggressive advocates" that school personnel believe are necessary. First of all, their own school experiences were terrible. It's not hard to imagine how uncomfortable dealing with Clarissa's teachers must be for Mr. Vega, who doesn't speak much English, and for Mrs. Ruiz, who was left back four times in ninth grade.

It seemed that Mrs. Ruiz would only press for Clarissa to be given additional help if she had me with her, to smooth the way with school personnel, to write letters, and fill out forms, and to provide support and explanations. Perhaps this is unfair; Mrs. Ruiz did obtain appropriate help for her youngest daughter, with the assistance of the assistant principal and others. But with only my experience in Clarissa's case to go on, I sensed that Mrs. Ruiz was reluctant to move unless I was there with her.

I have a recollection of one encounter with authorities that makes it easier for me to understand Mrs. Ruiz's reluctance. On the day that we visited the Committee on Special Education headquarters to deliver the letter requesting that Clarissa be evaluated, we were met at the door by an armed guard, who challenged us before agreeing we could enter. We were told to

wait without being given any explanation of what was taking place, or what the procedures would be. We were made to wait for thirty minutes, even though all we were doing was dropping off a letter.

As I write this, I remember that the official directing the Committee on Special Education is someone I know and respect, someone whose good intentions, professionalism, and expertise I can attest to. Nevertheless, for Mrs. Ruiz, who doesn't have a car, who doesn't have money to spare to spend on a taxi, who has had bad experiences of her own in school, going to the CSE to deliver a letter asking that Clarissa's eligibility for special resources be certified is certainly discourage.

And keep in mind that it wasn't easy for Mrs. Ruiz to have a letter to submit. She didn't feel up to drafting such a letter, and school personnel felt that it would be inappropriate for them to do so. Because of my research, and my selection of Clarissa's family as a study subject, I was available, but had I not been there, who would have written the letter? (And if Mrs. Ruiz didn't writer the letter, Clarissa's chances for special resources would have depended on her teacher requesting the evaluation, none of Clarissa's teachers in third, fourth, or fifth grade had ever done so.)

Furthermore, the Educational Planning Conference was similarly off-putting. While the professionals on the school-based support team follow proper procedures, they don't really address Mrs. Ruiz. They communicate in the language of professionals, establishing their authority and expertise, but the effect is not to assure the mother that her child is in good hands; rather, the effect is to intimidate her.

Despite the fact that CES 818 has made major strides in establishing partnerships with parents, to Mrs. Ruiz and other parents like her, the school sends out repeated signals that it does not respect her nor welcome her participation. For instance, when Clarissa is required to write all her homework in cursive script, how is Mrs. Ruiz supposed to monitor Clarissa, much less help her? When Clarissa's report card consists of a long series of ratings, without narrative or description, how can Mrs. Ruiz conclude that the school values her support in teaching Clarissa? When the parent-teacher conference is a fifteen-minute affair, and you have to bring your children there because no childcare is provided, and you have to wait on line because there are no scheduled appointments, how can you believe that the school really wants you to be a partner?

Open Doors: The Story of the Arjay Family

If the story of the Vega Ruiz family typified home-school relationships at CES 818, it would be easy to pigeonhole the school as one, which the partnership reform movement had failed to reach. But as I came to know Luther Arjay, one of Clarissa's classmates, and Maria, his mother, I realized that the situation at CES 818 was more complex.

At first, Luther was one of the invisible children in Mrs. Lynns' classroom. He volunteered nothing, and spoke so softly it was easy to miss what he was saying. I hardly took any notes about Luther until December, when his mother visited the classroom on a day when Mrs. Lynns was busy teaching. Mrs. Arjay, a tall, youthful woman who speaks English with only a slight accent, is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, and a Jehovah's Witness, while her husband is from Guyana, of East Indian descent. She was dropping in on Luther's classroom frequently, so one day, I volunteered to speak to her while Mrs. Lynns continued teaching her

lesson. I opened the conversation by saying that Luther often seemed sad and tired in class; she responded by explaining that Luther had experienced a kidney problem two years earlier; ever since, he'd been suffering from the side effects of his medication, as well as depression. Just recently, she told me, Luther seemed to be regaining his full strength, but she was still worried about his apparent indifference to his schoolwork.

After I had talked to Mrs. Arjay and experienced her concern and caring for her son, I began to take notice of Luther more frequently. I learned that he was a talented artist, who'd been selected to participate in a special program called Arts Connection. Every week, Luther and two of his classmates went up to the art room to work with a visiting artist on a school project -- painting a mural to decorate the walls of the modular early elementary school classrooms across the street.

As much as Luther enjoyed painting the mural, he hated doing his homework, and by January, Mrs. Arjay came to school to complain to Mrs. Lynns that Luther's homework assignments were killing her and disrupting family life. Every night, Mrs. Arjay explained, she would have to interrupt her preparation of the family dinner to stand watch over Luther's shoulder to monitor his progress. Whenever she turned back to the stove, his head would slump on the kitchen table or he would begin staring into space. Watching over Luther was interfering with meal preparation, keep Mrs. Arjay from attending meetings at the Jehovah Witness Kingdom Hall, and piling frustration on top of exhaustion. Was there anything that Mrs. Lynns could do to help?

In her patient, gentle voice, Mrs. Lynns explained that her homework assignments should take no more than an hour. But she understood that Luther was taking longer, and she promised

that she would not come down hard on Luther if he did not turn all of his homework in on time. My sister-in-law, the assistant principal, who had been delivering a message to Mrs. Lynns when Mrs. Arjay came in, joined the conversation. When she learned that part of the reason that Luther took so long to complete his assignments was that he dawdled while copying the textbook questions down onto his homework paper in cursive script, she offered to help Mrs. Arjay by having her secretarial staff duplicate the homework from the textbooks, so that Luther would not have to spend so much time copying. Although Mrs. Lynns likes children to practice their cursive writing while doing homework, she went along with this suggestion.

Luther's work improved after this, even though he soon stopped bringing his books to the assistant principal's office to be copied. (When I noticed him copying his assignments in his notebook, and asked why he wasn't taking advantage of Mrs. Hillman's offer, he explained that his classmates were teasing him about getting preferential treatment). Luther's attention to lessons improved, his grades rose, and his emotional tone lightened. By the time it was announced that his drawing, entitled "My Neighborhood," had captured top prize in a citywide art competition sponsored by the Transit Authority, Luther had become something of a school celebrity. CES 818's corporate sponsor, Capital Re, even gave Luther a scholarship to pay for art lessons the following year.

Curious to know more about Luther and his family, I offered one day in springtime to take the Arjay family to an art museum or to a gallery in Soho, their choice. Mrs. Arjay agreed, and on the next school half-day, we were on our way to visit the Guggenheim Museum. (I figured that whether or not they enjoyed the paintings, the children would enjoy the building. I wasn't sure if they would perceive Soho to be exciting or just weird).

On the trip, over hamburgers at a nearby McDonalds's (the children's choice) I told Maria that I thought it had taken a lot of courage for her to come in and complain about her problems with Luther's homework. Smiling shyly as she always does when she's praised, Mrs. Arjay explained that Luther's homework battles had become so draining she had felt desperate for relief -- and besides, she added, she had plenty of support from the parent-teacher program she attended.

That was how I learned that Mrs. Arjay participated in a teacher- and parent-education program sponsored by the Lehman College Institute for Literacy Studies. Called the Elementary Teachers Network, the program taught 15 CES 818 teachers and two parents how to understand children as unique learners. Mrs. Arjay told me that she loved the program, had learned to think of the teachers as her friends and allies, had begun to dream about getting a college education for herself (the ETN program awarded parents college credits and teachers graduate credits). Gathering the courage to talk to Mrs. Lynns about homework misery was easier, Mrs. Arjay explained, because her ETN experience gave her confidence that Mrs. Lynns would receive her in a spirit of cooperation. She didn't think of teachers as distant, alien authority figures anymore, as she had when she struggled through high school in the Bronx.

Maria's experience with ETN at CES 818 had impressed her so much, she told me, that at the end of June, when Luther graduated from fifth grade, she was determined to enroll him in the best middle school she could find. Her new friends at the Institute for Literacy Studies were helping her, she told me.

Mrs. Arjay was the only parent I'd met from Mrs. Lynns'class who was actively seeking a middle school for her child in the hopes of finding something better than what the local district

chose for them.

After I learned about Maria's participation in ETN, I assumed that ETN was primarily responsible for Luther's dramatic academic improvement in Mrs. Lynns' classroom. While Maria's participation in this small and special program had enabled her to help Luther, I reasoned, most parents of Mrs. Lynns' students were not encouraged and trained to participate in their children's education. ETN was an interesting phenomenon, I concluded, but isolated and atypical, not central to what CES 818 was about.

This conclusion reflected my erroneous assumption that CES 818 was a relatively "typical" school, rather than one deeply engaged in the process of reform. My mistake only became clear to me the following winter, after I asked Mrs. Arjay what I thought was an innocuous question: why how she get involved in ETN in the first place? Her answer contradicted my assumption that ETN was atypical of 818's program, for Maria told me that participating in a different parent education program at 818 first brought her to ETN. It seems that when Luther's younger brother Joel was in pre-K, Mrs. Arjay used to come to school in the morning at 9 AM, and, rather than return home only to return at 11, when pre-school ended, she used to stay in the mini-school for a parent education program CES 818 ran for mothers of pre-K students. In this wonderful program, Maria told me, she learned how to play with her children, make books with them and read to them in ways that supported their learning.

The following year, Mrs. Arjay began helping Joel's kindergarten teacher organize classroom activities, and aided the school's social working by providing Spanish-English translations. Workshops on health, nutrition, disease prevention, and learning disabilities, brought to 818 on a grant initiated by the principal, were an additional inducement to keep Mrs.

Arjay at the school. So was the parent association, which had its own office, from which fund-raisers were planned, trips organized and new programs discussed and initiated. One day, the social worker, who had become a friend, invited Maria to join a program called ETN. Along with one of the Parent Association officers, Maria agreed to enroll. When I finally understood that ETN was not isolated, but was indeed consistent with the principals' efforts to involve parents in the school, I decided to make sense of what I had learned. Before this, I had assumed that CES 818 was different from the schools my colleagues on the research team were studying, because it presented formal and informal barriers that kept parents from getting close to the school and its staff. Instead, I now understood, CES 818 was using some of the same parent involvement programs as our other three study schools.

However, at CES 818, parent education, participation, and governance programs were not integral to the school; they were three of the many initiatives the school had undertaken. ETN and the parent education programs were concentrated in the early elementary annex, across the street from the main street building. The teachers in the annex were for the most part, younger, and less experienced teachers than those in the upper grades, and had more incentive to take the ETN program, which offered graduate credit. In the upper grades, teachers like Mrs. Lynns, who already had a Master's degree, were far less likely to participate in ETN.

Indeed, when I told my sister-in-law, one of the assistant principals in the main school building how impressed I was with ETN, she told me that the school had too many reform programs going on. It needed to focus, she told me, and ETN was one of the programs that had to go.

Conclusion

The efforts to promote family school partnerships at CES 818 illustrate a central dilemma of school reform. Almost everyone believes that partnerships are a good idea, and efforts to foster partnerships are ubiquitous. But to form an effective partnership, there must be mutual respect, an acceptance by all parties that school personnel and family members have the student's best interests at heart. The attitudinal changes that are required to foster such respect and acceptance must be deep and widespread throughout the school community. A whole school culture must be transformed; transforming school culture can only be accomplished when the project is understood to be central to the school's reform.

At CES 818, fostering school-family partnerships was given priority and resources, but it was not central to the school's reform. Curriculum development, professional development, test preparation, special education and other programs proceeded separately from the partnership effort, and sometimes openly contradicted that effort. While the partnership project was based on the assumption that parents are the students' most important teachers, and have the students' best interests at heart, other school programs reflected more traditional notions of parental deficits, and the necessity for the school to give students what their parents cannot.

Teachers overwhelmed by large classes, in large schools, with a largely lower class and immigrant population may hold onto the notion that they are the last bastions of civilization as a way to cope. Principals who challenge this culture risk losing their staff's support. When it comes to teachers with seniority, principals may find they have little leverage to push for change.

At CES 818, some parents find the doors open, others find doors closed. Mrs. Arjay's experience with the early elementary teachers gave her the confidence to approach Mrs. Lynns and develop a partnership with her. Mrs. Ruiz experienced the same school as judgmental and

threatening. I suspect that throughout the country, where partnerships are heralded as essential to school reform, a similar pattern of unevenness will be found. For in a culturally diverse society where culture wars rage, where inequality grows and poverty persists, the cultural transformations on which effective partnerships need to be based are exceedingly hard to achieve.

David Bensman, Montreal, Canada, April 20, 1999

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